

With Love, Grief and Fury 1

Summer 2019

Today Iceland held a funeral
to mourn its first glacier
lost to climate change

the Amazon is on fire
and the black smoke
can be seen from space

the global protests
the world is in flame
everywhere, chaos, conflict

I cannot read this page
my eyes blurred with tears
with love, grief and fury

Poppies

The day my first
poetry book was published
it wasn't how I thought it would be.

I was alone in my backyard,
I filled a pot with mud
and planted poppy seeds.

Poking the dirt with my fingers,
I made holes in the earth and
mud caked under my nails.

I knew the poppies
would be beautiful one day –
they would take time to grow,

but what pleasure it would be
to see the first green shoots
and then the first flower bloom.

The day my first
poetry book was published
it was a hot July afternoon.

The air was summer-soft
and the bees were humming
and so I decided I should celebrate.

I went indoors to make a piña colada.
I assembled ice and rum and
pineapple and coconut cream;

I felt so happy in that moment,
but then the blender exploded
splashes of coconut concoction

all sticky all over the kitchen,
up the walls, puddling the floor.
The kitchen was a total mess

but once it was cleaned up
the second attempt worked
that piña colada tasted of

tropical holidays and good times.
I sipped the rum cocktail
and sat alone in the yard,

quietly watching the patch of
still-wet mud and quiet earth,
and I daydreamed about the poppies –

the activity beneath the surface,
the potential and the promise,
how those poppies might bloom one day.

The day my first
poetry book was published
it wasn't how I thought it would be.

I was already grown
and forty years old,
and I felt tired

and like I'd been waiting
such a long time to do this small thing –
to hold a published book in my hands.

I sat alone drinking a piña colada
and I planted poppy seeds,
and then I said cheers to me,

I made a lot of mess
just to sit
here.

When You Stub Your Toe

it hurts you, and in that moment you don't think of all toes throughout history that hurt. You do not want to look at other people's stubbed toes. You do not want to know about people who have also stubbed a toe. Your pain is now and here in the present moment. No. You do not want to read a poem about a toenail moon right now. No. You do not want to hear a song about a man who sucked his own toes. Thank you. You do not want to watch a documentary about reflexology. No, you do not want a foot massage. Thank you. No. You do not want to hear a podcast about chiropody. Your own toe is throbbing and it is all you can think about right now. No human has ever felt a pain like this pain that is your pain and you have to live with it and live through it right now and in this moment. I am sorry. Nobody can do all that hurting for you, that pain is yours. When you stub your toe it hurts you, and just you, and in that moment in time it is just you and your toe.

And so it is with grief.

Tell Good People Good Things

Tell each other you love each other.
Say love. Show your love. Speak it.

Do not wait to talk to a flower
in the hope the dead will hear the love
you could've said before.

Do not wait to talk to headstones
and weep at faded photographs.

Please do not die with all unsaid
and then haunt your loved ones
appearing in night and shadow and dream.

You are alive now. So love now.

Tell your good people all the good things.
Tell each other you love each other.

Do not wait to softly weep to flickering candles
or cry about your love to a flower too late.

Say love. Show your love. Share it.

Shadow

We finish doing a show and we're having a photograph taken outside and I take off my mask to use a smile I prepared earlier and it is hot and summer and so lovely and sunny and I grin for the photograph whilst I think how strange that this photo will be shared in a future when this will be behind us perhaps when scary times have passed and we don't have to wear masks and I am there and I am smiling like it is all alright and like I am in the middle of some summer happy times with the warm sunshine on my face but then I get told off for being big in the centre of the frame and they tell me to move to the side a bit and so I stop grinning and move to the left and shrink to the edge of the group photograph and slip into the dark and I feel dead awkward and apologetic and wherever that photograph is now I know that I shrink and I know I couldn't have hid it as my face betrays all these emotions just as a cloud covers the sun and that image will be evidence of the times and of that day and how I was really shrinking and feeling bad deep down and it will remind me of feeling alone and sad and it will remind me of what hard work it is to appear OK on the surface when your world is on fire and things feel desperately frightening and we're pretending we are fine and if I ever see that photograph it will remind me of that feeling of trying to hide hurt and fear and how anxious and

how fragile I can be and how I notice I hold my own hand when I feel anxious and how the left hand holds the right and how the left hand holds the right too tight and after the photo is taken and after I say goodbye and thank you very much and thank you and thank you and bye-bye and I walk the streets of London towards the Marylebone hospital and I'm feeling like I am a shadow and hot and strange and sad and the world is too fast and loud and the people walking past with faces in their masks all sinister and I go to the hospital to see you there in pain and exhausted and battling a monster with your grey and sticky skin and we talk about the weather and hospital food *it's not that bad really* you say *the nurses are so kind* and you're excited to have an ice-cold fizzy orange because your throat and nose are sore with all the tubes and then you ask how the job went and suddenly none of it matters and I laugh and tell you about that awkward group photo which doesn't matter anymore and then we squeeze hands and then I have to just leave you there and you tell me to be brave but that I have to go and you briefly pull your mask down and show me your courageous face and I see how strong you are being and I ask you to promise me that you will be good for the doctors and nurses and do as you are told and rest and you say you will and that you will phone me at bedtime and then I have to go and just leave you there and I leave you and I don't want to leave you and I go and I cry into my mask and I know nobody can see me crying because I have learned how masks are really good for hiding tears and I cry openly with a blue mask covering my feelings as I walk

from Marylebone to Oxford Circus like my feet are lead and rocks and the world is hot and loud and busy and sweaty and viral and contagious and terrible and I sit on a busy train with my teary and wet and snotty mask and my left hand holds my right too tight my left hand holds the right and I'm wishing you were here holding hands with me with joy and summer light and then when I am at our front door I put the key in the lock and out of habit I call out *bello* but our house is all hollow and dark and the world too big without you and I'm falling into nothing and this feeling is as scary as hell but someday we'll see how this was and one day you will come home to me and this fear will be a faded history and the sickness will be past and it will all be OK and maybe then one day we will see how I stand awkwardly in this one photograph of this time and see how I hold my own hand and how the left hand holds the right and how the left hand holds the right too tight and see how I fill with lightning with my shadow burning in the sun.

And You Will Go

to new places
that feel as though
they're familiar
and you will go
walk in footsteps
known by ancestors
and your elders
and you will go
to ancient places
and long
forgotten
histories
and you will go
make your own song
build your own fire
and share
your warmth
and you will go
to some soft shore
but be different
every visit
a little older
seashells in your pocket
walking with love

across the sand
and you will go
to the most
difficult place
but each time
a little stronger
every time
letting go
and you will go
and face
the strange
and the cold
and the dark
and you will be
so awfully brave
about it and
we will be so
proud of you
and you will go
and surprise yourself
because it isn't
as easy as it looks
and you will go
dancing, dancing
among the glad
and the joyful
and know it is
blessed and feel
free and happy

and alive in it
and you will go
to the broken place
with the locked door and
the peeling paint
but hold your head up
and know deep down
you have to turn the key
and let your light
flood inside
and you will go
to gardens where
you ought not be
where you are told
you do not belong
and you will go
up to the fancy place
and speak your piece
your hands might shake
but your voice will boom
and you will go
and hold your own
and introduce yourself
you say your own name
take it back from
their mouth and
pronounce it
just as your
grandmothers did

and you will go
and stretch out
your trusting hand
and they will shake it
they will shake your hand
and then you will ask yourself
can they mean me
for surely not
and with that
you will laugh
and you will cry
with your love
grief and fury
you will go
and you will go
and you will go
and you keep going
for you have
many places to be
many faces to see
so much living
to hold in one life
and you will grow
and you will go
and smile your smile
and every time
you will say wow
always, wow
I never felt

like this before
wow, I never ever
felt like this before
oh, my darling
you will say that
every time
and you will go
you will go
you will go
and that's you
you see
you just
keep going
keep going
keep going
keep going
my darling
you will go
go, go, go
and that's what
they will always
remember
and love
about you.

Wish You Were Here

Wish you were here

heatwave. this island is hot. too hot too hot too hot. families get into sticky cars queue on motorways. visit service stations. share germ and virus. cough cough cough. they piss and smoke and eat meat pies. suck coffee through plastic straws that end up in the guts of whales. choking turtles. suffocating seahorses

Wish you were here

another washed up dinghy. humans flee war and famine and extreme weather. climate disasters. see how they drown. left to sink on purpose or taken away to be detained in filthy cells. no welcome is no welcome. the seaside stinks of it. the same sea water they fish and trawl is the same soft green tide they frolic and play in. all laughter. all swimming. all paddling. splashing in death

Wish you were here

the memory of water. how water remembers everything it touches and tastes. it is as eternal as space. salt water holds us in her memory. you weep and mourn. you scatter ashes. you become mulch for bottom feeders

Wish you were here
the death toll rises. traffic belching fumes. the thick and
muggy air. tourists crowding every seaside town. with ripe
breath. rough city manners. hear them bark on phones. *well,*
kids deserve a break. they say *we need a bit of sea air* as they swarm
the beaches. flabby red walrus in musk. elephant seals. mating
ritual. during a global pandemic

Wish you were here
record breaking heatwave. the sun burns the skin. beetroot
red. raw tuna pink. Cancer laughs his head off sitting on
the hot sand with his new pal. see Coronavirus laugh. see
Cancer laugh. they are best friends this summer. see them
kick a beach ball. watch them play. they share fags in the
midday sun. with a persistent cough

Wish you were here
I'm not racist but . . . I want to get black. grill the legs. cook
your face. coconut oil. slather it on. sizzling sweat. snake
flaking skin. suck a fag and throw the butt. chuck away the
empty beer can with the other pretty litter. chew on grease
and sugar. lick frozen cow tit milk. piss in the sea. piss in
a doorway. piss in a phone box where the defibrillator goes.
heart attack and chips. sticks of rock and shit. forget to
wash your hands. kiss me quick. spread the virus. *ouch my*
sunburn hurts ouch

Wish you were here

see the sun set. a bloody sky. all hell fire. thousands lost.
dead are the refugees. dead are the elderly. dead is the nurse.
dead is the toilet cleaner. dead is the pint puller. dead is
the chippy. all dead now. and so who will wash up? who
will clean the bogs? *sorry* they say *she is not coming into work*
today they say *sorry we tested positive* *sorry* they say *he got taken*
away and never came back. I forgot to wash my hands of this.
dead are the dead are the dead

Wish you were here

the virus spikes. the death toll escalates. the heat escalates.
the panic escalates. the vulnerable are dying. it is as if the
entire world is suicidal. or that they are in fact murderous.
the sky is spilt red wine. the sea is a bloody graveyard. time
to stay home. stay safe. the screaming child. hot and tired.
stamping on a sandcastle. the entire country is having a
tantrum. so come on then. give it an ice lolly to shut it up.
give it a nice cream tea. give it a battered sausage. give it a
knicker-bocker-glory. knees up mother brown. let the germs
spread. let the lies spread. let the fear spread. drunk wasps
circle overflowing bins. mad seagulls peck at chicken bones.
mounds of trash. beer cans and bottles. smashed glass. over-
flow of raw sewage. flakes of burnt skin and fag ash. plastic
particles and shit. all ingrained into the sand. the pretty
picnic litter. shimmering in the sun. more shit to choke the
sea. a popped plastic beach ball left to strangle birds. garbage
tied tight about the throat.

highest temperatures ever recorded. highest death rates.
Cancer and Covid dance, disease and death. Cancer and
Covid laugh together, partying, in a heatwave, in a pandemic.
in the 2020s

Wish you were here?

The Girl in the Green Cardigan

We are walking
in a long line
in flooded lands –
dirty water, disemboque.
Black mud sloshes underfoot;
traffic, people, sludge, dogs,
a slow trudging and pulling
of suitcases and boxes,
all you can carry –
your life on your back.

A little girl in a green cardigan
looks back to wave to me.
We wave to each other,
we are waving goodbye.
I wave until I can
no longer see her,
until she is a shape
in a paper chain,
silhouetted as
paper elephants
trunk to tail,
pale sun setting
behind them.

I'm alone in all of this,
everything gone,
everyone is lost,
no telling who survived
or where my people are.
I feel it vividly
with pain and sorrow,
the heaviest grief.

I saw another wave —
a monumental monster
crushing everything,
as heavy as a mountain,
angry as all weather.
We knew it was coming
and could do nothing.
You cannot stop water
being water or
people being
people.

Wheels get stuck in thick clag,
splattering oily-brown slurps,
cars and buses and trucks
left abandoned or overloaded
with wet faces squashed
against bloody smashed glass.
I have no choice but to
follow the crowds on foot,

perhaps to higher ground and safety,
but all is catastrophe and chaos.

The smell of human fear and stink
and smoke and burning debris;
people begging, pushing and shoving,
turning ugly, stealing and fighting
each other, and every person wishing
for these times before times:
when home was a nice home,
when home was safe and still,
when there was once a cool pillow,
and when that was once
our own safe bed in a room
in a home where love sleeps.

But it is all lost and rubble
under silt and water.
No bed, no home, no love,
nothing and nowhere,
we are lost, dispossessed.

Some seem prepared –
I have an envy for
good sturdy boots and coats,
batteries and tinned food,
torches and tools and tents.

I jealously watch people find people,
how they weep and hold each other.

Then under a bent tree
I observe two boys with a phone.
They are out of their heads,
mad and bitterly laughing,
cackling, sitting in the mud,
reading social media posts out aloud,
the last goodbyes we shared.

I am shivering.
I look down at my own
trembling filthy hands,
in which I appear to hold
a crumpled photograph
of the little girl
in the green cardigan.
She is sitting on a bicycle
and squinting in the sun.